

# Review of Oppenheimer Case

## THE GREAT WEAPONS HERESY

Thomas W. Wilson Jr.

(Houghton Mifflin, 275 pp., \$5.95)

Reviewed by George Thayer

The reviewer is the author of the recently published book

*The War Business.*

concentrating almost exclusively on events up to and including the 1954 security hearings.

Furthermore, the book is poorly edited. Banalities, clichés and tiresome phrases stumble like drunken puppets across the pages. Readers are assaulted with such tedium as: "He was coach, cheerleader, quarterback, troubleshooter and father confessor rolled into one" (describing Oppenheimer as director of Los Alamos). Worse, the author, who served until recently as minister to the U.S. mission to NATO, has the habit—guaranteed to produce a facial tic—of beginning many of his paragraphs with the same sloppy phrase, namely, "in any event," occasionally with the variant, "in any case."

Perhaps the biggest fault of the book lies in Wilson's failure to convince the reader that he has a firm command of his subject. He is unable to decide whether he should assume that the reader knows the basic facts, and thus, just concentrate on his argument, or that the reader is ignorant, and tell the entire story. Sadly, the author tries to satisfy both impulses, and the result is a curious stew of lightly touched upon episodes and opinions that bear little stamp of authority or conviction.

The book conveys none of the human drama or sense of unreality that is so evident in Stern's book. Nor does it provide the reader with any new insights into Oppenheimer's character or the reasons why his interlocutors on the review board reached the tortured decision they did. There is no analysis of the hearings themselves, nor any in-depth study of post-hearings developments. To bolster his "heresy" case, Wilson tends to belittle the significance

of Oppenheimer's opponents, and the decision to tedium as: "He was coach, move against him. He also fails to explore sufficiently what triggered the hearings.

Yet, despite all these faults, Wilson does make one valid point. Oppenheimer, he writes, was one of the first and surely one of the most prominent and influential Americans to recognize that 5,000 nuclear bombs would not necessarily make a nation militarily superior to one with only 1,000 nuclear bombs. If Soviet society can be effectively destroyed with 1,000 A- or H-bombs (taking into account duds and those destroyed before reaching target), what is the point of having 5,000?

The attitude that somehow the United States is more secure by "staying ahead" of the Soviet Union, when either country has the capacity virtually to destroy the other with only a small fraction of the total bombs in its arsenal, is still with us today. Until recently, it was fashionable in the Pentagon to define "victory" as having more nuclear missiles left over than the U.S.S.R. after both American and Soviet societies had been obliterated. By the time we install the MIRV missile system, we will have the capacity to rain an estimated 11,000 nuclear bombs on the Soviet Union, many times the absolute maximum quantity required to do the job completely.

It is an insane way of looking at our national security requirements and Oppenheimer was one of the first to perceive the implications and results of such folly. Wilson has grasped the essence of Oppenheimer's "heresy" and he makes this point well.

However, it is a point that should have been made in a magazine article, not a book.



Thomas W. Wilson Jr.

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Weapons Heresy

The Oppenheimer  
Case

There is no doubt that when history makes its final judgment the treatment Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer received at the hands of the United States concerning his fitness to remain a government consultant will be viewed as nothing less than a national scandal.

Oppenheimer, it is clear, was "tried" and condemned in 1954 not for his associations and actions but for his unpopular opinions and his influence in academic and government circles.

Because he recognized the meaninglessness of military superiority in the age of overkill, because he sought both the curbing of secrecy in nuclear matters and the development of a "family" of smaller nuclear weapons (as opposed to big bombs), because he became identified as leader of the opposition to the development of the H-bomb, and because of his brilliance and remarkable powers of persuasion, he was deemed sufficiently dangerous to American security by the "Big Bomber" generals, the advocates of massive retaliation, and others, that he had to be expunged from government lest the bacillus of his ideas infect the minds of policy planners. It is a shameful episode in our history, something of which none of us can be proud.

Unfortunately, this book, *The Great Weapons Heresy* by Thomas W. Wilson Jr., is not the definitive work on the subject. The best book is still Philip M. Stern's *The Oppenheimer Case: Security on Trial*, written with the collaboration of Harold P. Green.

To begin with Wilson's title is misleading. One must read nearly one-third of the book before it is clear that "Great" modifies "Weapons" rather than "Heresy."

The dust jacket also tells us that the book concerns itself with "the struggle behind our present nuclear dilemma as reflected in the tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer." Yet, except for several pages toward the end, the book hardly touches on "the struggle behind our present nuclear dilemma."